

County receives the proposal for foster-kids ranch | Father Joe Carroll seeks Campo site

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After being stalled for months, plans for a ranch in Campo that would house 240 abused and neglected children are moving forward.

A formal proposal for the controversial PromiseLand ranch was submitted to the county yesterday, more than a year and a half later than officials at the St. Vincent de Paul charity had planned.

Father Joe Carroll of St. Vincent de Paul said he is confident the East County project will be approved so that construction can begin next year.

"My plan is that next July, I'm going to be digging the first hole," Carroll said. "I've been disappointed in the past, but I'm very optimistic."

Campo is 40 miles east of San Diego, just a mile north of the Mexican border. The population, including surrounding areas, is 3,100.

St. Vincent de Paul officials began plans for a ranch for foster children after Alpine businessman Tom Dyke donated two pieces of property in fall 1998. The 427-acre northern section of the property includes a 5,400-square-foot house and a guesthouse. The 200-acre southern portion is undeveloped.

The request for a major-use permit filed yesterday is only for the southern portion, where St. Vincent de Paul officials want to build casitas to house the foster children and their supervisors. A school, chapel and conference center would also be built on the site.

Carroll said he hopes to submit a permit application for the northern portion within two months.

The southern parcel of land has no direct access to state Route 94, the only major highway in Campo. Dyke and two partners owned 116 acres of land by 94, which could provide access to the site.

Dyke's partners donated their share of the land to St. Vincent de Paul, but Dyke had a falling-out with charity officials and refused to turn over his share.

St. Vincent de Paul filed suit against Dyke, seeking to divide the property. Once the suit is resolved, the charity will have access to the ranch property on its two-thirds share of the land, while Dyke will retain his one-third share, Carroll said.

St. Vincent de Paul officials also encountered obstacles when they sought to put in a 24-foot-wide decomposed granite road that would connect the northern and southern sections of the property.

The road would have been built on a 600-acre tract of land owned by the federal Bureau of Land Management. The Navy, which runs a 1,000-acre training camp for Navy SEALs nearby, had asked that the property be included in a total of 3,500 acres that would be designated no longer available for public use.

Carroll said he has dropped plans to build the access road. Carroll estimated that the project will cost between \$75 million and \$100 million to build. He said fund raising has been stalled while potential donors waited for the plans to be submitted to the county. He said \$10 million to \$20 million has been promised.

Since the PromiseLand ranch was proposed, it has met with resistance from a group led by Campo resident Michael Thometz. In response to concerns about the project, St. Vincent de Paul officials had plans for the ranch redrawn to allow more open space and preserve a stand of oak trees.

Thometz said he did not want to comment on the plans submitted by St. Vincent de Paul until he reviewed them, but said he remains opposed to building the ranch in the backcountry community.

"It's far too massive and it will overwhelm the resources here," Thometz said. "While it's a wonderful project, I wait to be convinced that this is the place to put it."

Randy Lenac, chairman of the Campo-Lake Morena Sponsor Group, said the proposal has divided the East County community like no other. He said he is looking forward to having the project finally come up for review.

"I just would like to see the issue completed," Lenac said. "I'll be happy that the community will be able to get over this thing, regardless of which way it's resolved."

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[Illustration]

2 MAPS; Caption: 1,2. County permit sought by St. Vincent de Paul (B-2:1,7; B-4:2; B-3:6); Credit: 1,2. PAUL HORN / Union-Tribune

Credit: STAFF WRITER